GRAUSTARK

GEORGE BARR MCCUTCHEON

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sive insanely as his greedy eyes careened through the last line. There was no signature, but in every word he saw her face, felt the touch of her dear hand, heard her timid heart beating for him-for him alone. Rapture thrilled him from head to foot, the delirious rapture of love. He could not speak, so overpowering was the joy, the surprise, the awakening.

"Obey!" whispered Quinnox, his face aglow with pleasure, his finger quivering as he pointed commandingly toward the letter.

"Obey what!" asked Lorry dully. "The last line!"

He hastily reread the last line and then deliberately held the precious missive over the lamp until it ignited. He would have given all he possessed to have preserved it. But the last line commanded, "Burn this at once and in the presence of the bearer."

"There!" he said regretfully as he crumpled the charred remnants between his fingers and turned to the silent watchers. "Her crime goes up in smoke," mut-

tered Dangloss sententiously. "The princess commits no crime," retorted Quinnox angrily.

trusts four honest men.' "Where is she?" whispered the pris oner, with thrumming ears.

"Where all good women should be a 9 o'clock-in bed," replied Danglos shortly. "But will you obey her com

"So she conaid eald Lorry, smill We obey he said the mp And for that

But can this thing without necessitating explanations and possible complications? I will not obe if it is likely to place her in an embar 'rassing position.'

"She understands perfectly what sh is doing, sir. In the first place, she ha had my advice," said Dangloss, th good old betrayer of an official trust. You advised her to command you

to allow me to escape?" She commanded first, and then I advised her how to command you. Axphain may declare war a thousand times over, but you will be safe. That's

all we-I mean, all she wants.' "But I cannot desert my friend. How Is he to know where I've gone? Will not vengeance fall on him instead?"

"He shall know everything when the proper time comes. And now will you be ready at the hour mentioned? You have but to follow the instructions-I should say, the commands-of the wrigh-

"And be free! Tell her that worship her for this. Tell her that every drop of blood in my body belongs to her. She offers me freedom, but makes me her slave for life. Yes, I shall be ready. If I do not see you again, good friends, remember that I love you because you love her and because she loves you enough to intrust a most dangerous seret to your keeping, the ommission of an act that may mean the downfall of your nation." shock hands with them fervently.

It cannot be that, sir. It may cost lives of three of her subjects, but man save yourself can involve the princess or the crown. They may kill us, but they cannot force us to betray her. I trust you will be as loyal to the good girl who wen in a crown not upon her heart," and congloss earnestly.

"I have said my if men," said Lorry attention could but throw my and ther for must see her befor without telling her want heart!" he added passions of

"You must obey the comment. plicitly on your word of ho. transaction ends now," said Quar

"This escape means, then, that I a. not to see her again," he said, his voice choking with emotion.

"Her instructions are that you are to go tonight, at once," said Dangloss, and the black eyed soldier nodded confir-

mation. The prisoner paced the floor of his cell, his mind a jumble of conflicting emotions. His clinched hands, twitching lips and half closed eyes betrayed

the battle that was inflicting him with its carnage. Suddenly he darted to the door, crying: "Then I refuse to obey! Tell her that if she permits me to leave this hole I shall be at her feet before another night has passed. Say to her that I refuse to go from Graustark until I have seen her and talked with her. You, Quinnox, go to her now and tell her

this, and say to her also that there is something she must hear from my own lips. Then I will leave Graustark, and not till then, even though death be the alternative." The two men stared at him in amazement and consternation. "You will not escape?" gasped Quin-

"I will not be dragged away without seeing her." he answered resolutely,

throwing himself on the bed. Confounded young ass!" Dangloss. The soldler's teeth grated. A moment later the slab door closed softly, a key rattled and his visitors were goue-messengers bearing to him the most positive proof of devotion that man could exact.

He looked at his hands and saw the black stains from the charred letter. last evidence of the crime against the state. A tender light came to his eyes. a great lump struggled to his throat, and he kissed the sooty spots, murmuring her name again and again. How lonely he was! How cold and cheerless his cage! For the first time he began to appreciate the real seriousness of his position. Up to this time he had regarded it optimistically, confident of vindication and acquittal. He grew cold and shuddered instinctively as he realized that his position was so critical that the princess had deemed it necessary to resort to strate-



looking into the muz-

; in order to save him from oom. Starting to his feet, · floor, nervousness turning and to terror. He pounded and cried aloud. Oh, if he could but owing back those kindly mes-

sengers! Exhausted, torn by conflicting emotions, he at last dropped to the bed and buried his face in his arras, nearly mad with the sudden solitude of despair. He recalled her dear letter, the tender, helping band that had been stretched out to lift him from the depths into which he was sinking. She had written—he could see the words plainly that his danger was great; she could not endure life until she SUEW him to be safely outside the bounds of Graustark. His life was dear to her, and she would preserve it by dishonoring her trust. Then she had unfolded her plan of escape, disjointedly, guiltily, hopelessly.

·But she was offering him freedom only to send him away without granting one moment of joy in her presence. After all, with death staring him in the face, the practically convicted murderer of a prince, he knew he could not have gone without seeing her. He had been ungrateful perhaps, but the message he had sent to her was from his heart, and something told him that it would give her pleasure.

A key turned suddenly in the lock and his heart bounded with the hope that it might be some one with her surrender in response to his ultimatum. He sat upright and rubbed his swollen eyes. The door swung open, and a tall prison guard peered in upon him. a sharp eyed, low browed fellow in raincoat and helmet. His lantern's single unkind eye was turned menacingly toward the bed.

"What do you want?" demanded the coner irritably.

ad of answering, the guard prounlock the second or grated ping inside the cell a moment Smothering an exclamation, harry jerked out his watch and then ang to his feet, intensely excited.

t was just 12 o'clock, and he remembered now that she had said a guard would come to him at that hour. Was this the man? Was the plan to be carried out?

The two men stood staring at each other for a moment or two, one in the agony of doubt and suspense, the other quizzically. A smile flitted over the face of the guard. He calmly advanced to the table, putting down his lantern. Then he drew off his raincoat and helmet and placed in the other's hand a gray envelope. Lorry reeled and would have fallen but for the wall against which he staggered. A note from her was in his hand. He tore open the envelope and drew forth the letter. As he read be grew strangely calm and contented. A blissful repose rushed in to supplant the racking unrest of a moment before. The shadows fled and life's light was burning brightly once

more. She had written: I entreat you to follow instructions and go tonight. You say you will not leave Graustark until you have seen me. How rash you are to refuse liberty and life for such a trifle! But why, I ask, am I of-fering you this chance to escape? Is it because I do not hope to see you again? Is it not enough that I am begging, im-ploring you to go? I can say no more.

He folded the brief note, written in agitation, and, after kissing it, proceeded to place it in his pocket, determined to keep it to the last hour of his life. Glancing up at a sound from the guard, he found himself looking into the muzzie of a revolver. A deep scowl over-

ead the face of the man as he point ed to the letter and then to the lamp Lorry reluctantly held the note over the same and saw it crumble away as had its predecessor. There was to be no proof of her complicity left behind. He knew it would be folly to offer a bribe to the loyal guard.

After this very significant act the guard's face cleared, and he deposited

this big revolver on the table. Stepping to the cell's entrance, he listened intently, then softly closed the heavy iron doors. Without a word he began to strip off his uniform, Lorry watching him as if fascinated. The fellow look ed up impatiently and motioned for him to be quick, taking it for granted that the prisoner understood his part of the transaction. Awakened by this sharp reminder, Lorry nervously began to remove his own clothes. In five minutes his garments were scattered over the floor and he was attired in the uniform of a guard. Not a word had been spoken. The prisoner was the guard. the guard a prisoner.
"Are you not afraid this will cost you

your life?" asked Lorry, first in English, then in German. The guard merely shook his head, indicating that he could not understand.

He quickly turned to the bed, seized a sheet and tore it into strips, impatiently thrusting them into the other's hands. The first letter had foretold all this, and the prisoner knew what was expected of him. He therefore securely bound the guard's legs and arms. With a grim smile the captive nodded his head toward the revolver, the lantern and the keys. His obliging prisoner secured them, as well as his own personal effects, and was ready to depart. According to instructions, he was to go forth, locking the doors behind him, leaving the man to be discovered the next morning by surprised keepers. It struck him that there was something absurd in this part of the plan. How was this guard to explain his position with absolutely no sign of a struggle to bear him out? It was hardly plausible that a big, strong fellow could be so easily overpowered single handed. There was something wretchedly incongruous about the—but there came a startling and effective end to all criticism.

The guard, bound as he was, suddenly turned and lunged headforemost against the sharp bedpost. His head struck with a thud, and he rolled to the floor as if dead. Uttering an exclamation of horror, Loggy ran to his side. Blood was gushing from a long gash across his Mad, and he was already unconscipus. Sickened by the brave sacrifice, he picked the man up and placed him on the bed. A hasty examination proved that it was no more than a scalp wound and that death was too remote to be feared. The guard had done his part nobly, and it was now the prisoner's turn to act as resolutely and as unflinchingly. Sorry to leave the poor fellow in what seemed an inkuman manner, he strode into the corridor, closed and locked the doors dumsily and began the descent of the stairs. He had been instructed to act unhesitatingly, as the slightest show of nervousness would result in discovery.

With the helmet weil down over his face and the cape well up he steadily, even noisily, made his way to the next floor below. There were prisoners on this floor, while he had been the only occupant of the floor above. Straight ahead he went, flashing his lantern here and there, passing down another stairway and into the main corridor. Here he met a guard who had just come in from the outside. The man addressed him in the language of the country, and his heart almost stopped beating. How was he to answer? Mumbling something almost inaudible, he hurried on to the ground floor, trembling with fear lest the man should call to him to halt. He was relieved to find, in the end, that his progress was not to be impeded. In another moment he was boldly unlocking the door that led to the visitors' hall. Then came the door to the warden's office. Here he found three sleepy guards, none of whom paid any attention to him as he passed through and entered Captain Dangloss' private room. The gruff old captain sat at a desk writing. The escaping man half paused as if to speak to him. A sharp cough from the captain and a significant jerk of the head told him that there must be no delay. no words. Opening the door he stepped out into a storm so fierce and wild that he shuddered apprehensively.

"A fitting night!" he muttered as he plunged into the driving rain, forcing his way across the courtyard toward the main gate. The little light in the gatekeeper's window was his guide. so, blinded by the torrents, blown by the winds, he soon found himself be fore the final barrier. Peering through the window, he saw the keeper dozing in his chair. By the light from within he selected from the bunch of keys he carried one that had a white string knotted in its ring. This was the key that was to open the big gate in case no one challenged him. In any other case he was to give the countersign, 'Dangloss," and trust fortune to pass him through without question.

Luck was with him, and, finding the great lock, he softly inserted and turned the key. The wind blew the heavy gate open violently, and it required all of his strength to keep it from banging against the wall beyond. The most difficult task that he had encountered grew from his efforts to close the gate against the blast. He was about to give up in despair when a hand was laid on his shoulder and some one hissed in his startled ear:

"Sh! Not a word!" His legs almost went from under his body, so great was the shock and the Two strong hands joined his own in the effort to pull the door into position, and he knew at once that they belonged to the man who was to meg

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him on the corner at the right of the prison wall. He undoubtedly had tired of the delay and, feeling secure in the darkness of the storm, had come to meet his charge, the escaping prisoner. Their united efforts brought about the desired result, and together they left the prison behind, striking out against the storm in all its fury.

"You are late," called the stranger in

"Not too late, am I?" he cried back, clutching the other's arm.

"No, but we must hasten." "Captain Quianox, is it you?"

"Have a care! The storm has ears and can hear names," cautioned the As rapidly as possible they made their way along the black street almost a river with its sheet of water Lerry had lost his bearings and knew not whither he went, trusting to 110 guidance of his struggling companion There seemed to be no end to their journey, and he was growing weak be

neath the exection and the excitement "How far do we go?" he cried at la-"But a few rods. The carriage is : the next corner."

"Where is the carriage to take me?" he demanded.

"I am not at liberty to say." "Am I to see her before 1 go?"

"That is something I cannot answer. sir. My instructions are to place you

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